

Nimuendajá: The Eastern Timbira

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[837] (p. 179). A Neobrazilian is naturally struck by the Timbira's lack of that jealousy so excessively developed in his own society and practically the basis of sex life there. From this difference he draws conclusions for the Indians that would hold for himself.

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837 Yet the Ramkô'kamekra women unquestionably have an ideal of conjugal fidelity; without it, indeed, the grass widow's seclusion and mourning would be inconceivable, nor would adultery figure as a ground for divorce. Couples who have grown old together without ever separating are held up as paragons for the younger generation, and there is a fair number of such models in the tribe. The failure of many to attain the ideal does not disprove its existence. What characterizes Timbira in contrast to Neobrazilian notions of matrimony is the recognition of cases in which extramarital intercourse is not merely allowed but reckoned laudable and honorific, for example the exchange of wives by two kwq'nô or the role of the two precentresses in peacemaking. Further, since the child's welfare is a primary consideration, a mother must confess extramarital relations during the period of pregnancy in order that the adulterer may be secluded synchronously with the husband, both being thereby publicly acknowledged as fathers. This custom presupposes the husband's ability to bear the avowal with equanimity—an idea utterly opposed to Neobrazilian sentiment.

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183 Finally such an attitude is possible only among such a people as the Ramkô'kamekra, where the individual seems to exist mainly in order to function in a dozen distinct units in accordance with traditional prescriptions, where the supreme social commandment is at any cost to avoid internal dissension. The Timbira define "good" and "bad" men accordingly. He is "bad" who quarrels with tribesmen, insists on personal privileges, will not yield his claims—in short, acts like a kupê (Neobrazilian). A "good" man is one who, irrespective of the obvious justice of his case, meets another halfway, not from fear, but in order to avoid dispute; that is acting "like us Indians." Tompey (to agree) is the highest social virtue. Further, the ceremonial from which no person can absent himself in many ways forees disputants into cooperative activities.

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593 Mere suspicion is not held adequate to raise the charge of adultery, which can be established only by an eyewitness. Whenever the subject is broached, the first question asked is, "Have you seen it yourself?" The general aversion to disputes discourages informants: anyone who catches someone else's spouse in *flagrante delicto* maintains a discreet silence. Moreover, if the affair comes under discussion, this is restricted to the spouses and their kin; the fellow culprit is never, so far as I know, summoned for a reckoning.

I took cognizance of a fair number of occurrences of adultery. One day Wakái, a hapin of mine, had an irrefutable proof of his wife Kanô's infidelity. Taking his belongings, he left the house, halted in the space in front of it, and declared why he was acting thus. He spoke just loud enough to be heard by the neighbors, but with calm moderation. Kanô was genuinely grieved over this consequence of her intrigue. No sooner had her husband departed than she was never seen outside her dwelling. Her relatives, the man's age class, and sundry others—I myself was asked to collaborate as Wakái's hapin—all exerted themselves to patch up the difficulty and a week later the two were peaceably reunited.

In another case, a woman named Pyékára was a notorious adulteress, but her husband, otherwise no weakling, ignored her waywardness because he was afraid of otherwise being separated from his dearly beloved child.